

Justified Harm
By Marissa Igunbor



“Justified Harm” is a painting that explores the way people often judge victims based on their lifestyle and clothing choices versus the pain they were put through by a perpetrator of violence. It also touches on various aspects of my own identities as a biracial, Black, female, activist, advocate, and survivor of sexual violence. When creating this piece, I thought about the ways in which people justify harm. In the minds of many, we live in a “just” world where bad things should happen to bad people. As a result, individuals often question the actions of victims in search of what they did to “deserve” the harm that was done to them.

On the left side of the painting, there is a Black male figure dressed in a black hoodie and labeled as a “thug”. To his right is a question: was he in a gang? Beneath that are additional

projections from the public including “criminal” and “dangerous”. The man does have tattoos that demonstrate a sort of toughness; yet, he is also positioned in a non threatening manner and holding the hand of a female partner. Lastly, next to his right leg is a depiction of his future: murdered.

The inspiration for this part of the piece stems from Laurence Ralph’s “Becoming Aggrieved” and Claudia Rankine’s “The Condition of Black Life is a Condition of Mourning”. Ralph describes a mother’s grieving process after her son is murdered in front of her. He wrote, “discussions of Jo Jo’s death (and Mrs.Lana’s reaction to it) [are] often met with the following questions: How was Jo Jo raised? What did Jo Jo do? Was he a gang member?” (2017: 98). These questions sparked the idea for the questions surrounding the Black man in my painting and his label as a “thug”. Ralph articulates, “this premise suggests that the alleged black criminal is less human than the upright citizen, and therefore the black person’s killing is legitimate (2017: 99). Why does a murder victim’s gang affiliation impact the way others should empathize with their grieving families? Do human beings believe our grief must be limited to what Ralph describes as “legitimate” killings? Rankine’s piece adds:

there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black. (2015)

As a biracial, Black, female with three brothers and a Black father, I know this anxiousness all too well. My brothers and I all got similar warnings. In elementary school, our father would say:

“we must work twice as hard to get half as much in this world”. When we got our driver’s licenses he warned, “remember what I taught you in case you get pulled over... be respectful, keep your hands on the wheel, move slowly, explain all of your actions, and do everything you have to do to get back home alive”. Every Black kid I know is taught these things in order to keep ourselves out of situations where we are in harm’s way. Yet, I wonder: why is it our responsibility to make sure we don’t get killed? Shouldn’t we be teaching others not to murder us? These ideas of blame and responsibility are themes I wanted to explore with “Justified Harm”.

On the right side of the painting is a racially ambiguous woman wearing a red crop top and revealing shorts. I went back and forth as to what color skin I wanted to give her. Statistically, Black women are the most likely to be sexually assaulted. Yet, as a survivor, I chose to give her lighter skin more similar to my own. Luckily, when I was assaulted my second year of college, no one blamed me other than myself. My friends asked: “would you ever blame a survivor?...No... so why are you blaming yourself?”. My friends knew the work I did as a Rape Crisis Counselor, Sexual Violence Education/Prevention Educator, and Sexual Assault Survivor Advocate. They were right, I would never ever blame a survivor for what happened to them. So why was I blaming myself? Perhaps, it was because similar to others in our society, I had internalized the idea of justified harm.

Linda Ross Meyer’s *Suffering the Loss of Suffering*, gives insight into the ways legal constructions of harm only apply to pain that is viewed as unjust within the eyes of those who construct and maintain the law. She describes that while she is teaching law, “no one complains when I show movies about teenagers (‘juvenile delinquents’) sexually abused by guards in prison... but students skip class when I show movies of animal abuse” (Meyer 2014: 33). Her

students, and often judges and jurors, view those who commit illegal activities as deserving of punishment. In my work as a Rape Crisis Counselor, I learned that criminal histories aren't the only way others justify sexual assault. It was extremely common for survivors to get blamed for their own assaults on the basis of their sexual promiscuity or the way they dressed. These comments inspired the descriptions and questions that surround the female figure in my painting. In our society, we justify the rape of a sexually dressed woman in the same way we legitimize the murder of an "alleged black criminal" man.

Lastly, in the center of my painting and between the two figures is the word "victims" written in red. I wanted the words that were relevant to be written in a different color than the rest. Those words were: murdered, raped, and victims. Everything else written in black is ways others may justify the harm that was done to these individuals. Additionally, I chose to paint the man and woman holding hands as a way to demonstrate solidarity between the two. While I could have made the images of their fates much more violent, I wanted to make the painting both beautiful and sad at the same time. I felt there was no need to add more "trauma porn" to that which we often see on the news and social media platforms. In conclusion, I wanted "Justified Harm" to acknowledge the fact that no matter what life you live, what clothes you wear, and what race you are- your pain is seen, you are a victim, and the harm you endured is worthy of empathy.

Works Cited

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